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OLD FRENCH INFLUENCE ON MIDDLE ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

I

The inherent interest in the growth of the English language during the mediaeval period seems, in the light of the following brief researches, to justify a further criticism of a dissertation by Mr. F. H. Sykes, entitled *French Elements in Middle English* (Oxford, 1899).¹

Mr. Sykes defines thus the purpose of his investigation:

This dissertation aims to show that Middle-English became in its phrasal forms "halb-französisch;" that its phrasal power is indeed pre-eminently Romance in character. . . . The object of the present study is to show how, to what extent, and at what time the English language schooled itself to new phrasal expressions, which were often without equivalents in Anglo-Saxon, but which sometimes displaced equivalent Anglo-Saxon expressions; to show how far these phrasal changes proceeded under the influence of the Old French . . . ; to show the chronological movement of those phrasal changes so as to establish a comparison with the movement of change in the vocabulary; to draw from any ascertained results some conclusions respecting the character and chronology of the formation of standard English.

The "General Conclusions" on page 63 of his dissertation are practically in accord with the purpose of the thesis so definitely set forth at the outset.

¹ The alternative title reads: "Chapters Illustrative of the Origin and Growth of Romance Influence on the Phrasal Power of Standard English in the Formative Period."

Professor W. Franz presented a very convincing review of this essay in the *Literaturblatt für germanische und romanische Philologie*, July, 1900, cols. 241-43. He emphasized strongly the untrustworthiness of elements of this study, and concluded that "Die prinzipielle Frage der Beeinflussung des Mittelenglischen seitens des Altfranzösischen ist durch die vorliegende Leistung um keinen Schritt gefördert worden." Cf. also W. K. in *Literarisches Centralblatt*, 1901, cols. 688, 689. The notices by Professor A. S. Cook in the *Journal of Germanic Philology*, III, pp. 119, 120, and by Professor J. M. Garnett in the *American Journal of Philology*, XX, 4, p. 443, merely give a statement of contents.

A recent discussion by Professor A. Trampe Bødtker, "Bear and Take in Middle English Phrases" (Christiania, 1905; *Videnskabs-Selskabets Skrifter*, II, Hist.-Filos. Kl., 1905, No. 6), attempts to show that "the phrases pretended to be due to French influence are mainly based on Old English construction." My study, which presents evidence entirely from mediaeval languages, may serve to strengthen his conclusions. It will at least prove more definitely than has yet been done the untrustworthiness of Mr. Sykes's results. I may add here that a study of Old Norse phraseology, which was suggested to me by Professor Robinson, of Harvard University, is responsible for the present discussion, which was completed before the appearance of Professor Bødtker's treatise.

These confident declarations of purpose and of results are emphatic statements in regard to a somewhat obscure problem in the history of the English language between 1200 and 1400. The student of the history of English during this period of change—of decay and of growth—cannot but be skeptical as to the extensive phrasal power over the language which the author credits to the Old French. It is almost incredible that so vigorous a language as the Anglo-Saxon should so yield to an even dominating foreign tongue as to lose the power, which all languages must acquire as they become stronger, of forming such idiomatic expressions as are here brought forward. It is conceivable that in translations from a foreign tongue, or in works modeled closely after those of another language, many idiomatic expressions of one speech should be adopted by another. But that an entire language, used for purposes of communication and for artistic expression, a language of a people vigorous and growing, should, in the matter of one of the most subtle of the phenomena which a language displays, be so vitally affected as to become half-foreign—whether, in the case of English, *halb-französisch* oder *halb-nordisch* oder *halb-deutsch*—is a proposition the possibility of proof of which few students of language-growth would be prepared to admit.

Hence, this dissertation, which seeks to show the overwhelming influence of Old-French on Middle-English phraseology, deserves a careful scrutiny. The first part of the investigation, "Verbal Phrases," may serve not only for a study of some of the evidence in detail, but also for a more general consideration of the larger aspects of the subject, such as the method which the author adopts, his general attitude toward, and the soundness of his judgment in respect to, questions of chronological development, of change in language, and of the influences which were operative especially on the English language during the period under discussion.

The method to which Mr. Sykes adheres in his study seems to be as follows: a careful culling from the dictionaries of all phrases formed with the Middle-English verbs *beren*, *nimen*, and *taken*, likewise of those phrases formed with the Old-French verbs *porter*

and *prendre*; a study of the Middle-English phrases with respect to the uses of the verbs in Anglo-Saxon; and finally a consideration of the chronology of the Middle-English and Old-French phrases respectively. On the data so procured the author bases his conclusions as to the influence which Old French exerted on Middle English in the matter of its phrasal power. It will be evident, as the discussion proceeds, that this method of approach has its serious drawbacks, and that the conclusions at which the author arrives are not only not convincing, but that they are also in part in serious error.

At the outset, attention must be called to the undoubted insufficiency of the evidence which is offered by the dictionaries. A dictionary does not record all the uses of a word or phrase in any one author; neither does it attempt to record every appearance of a certain phrase in a language. Here is an evident limitation to the accurate determination of the forces which have exerted their influence on any language. The student must go to the literature itself; he must be satisfied not only of the mere existence of a phrase in the literature of a certain period, but also of the *extent* and *manner* of its appearance.¹ The kind of literature in which the phrase is found is often of primary importance in determining the history of that phrase. The detailed evidence in phrases which Mr. Sykes presents may rest upon a wide reading of the authors and works cited, but I see no ground for such an assumption. Some trustworthy results may come, as I believe they have come in this dissertation, without a wide reading knowledge of the literature; but no definite proof, as will appear from a study of some phases of the investigation, will be forthcoming until an exhaustive knowledge of Middle-English literature has been acquired or made use of by the inquirer in this field of linguistic history.

But granted for the moment that the evidence so secured from

¹ May not the phrasal significance of a combination of words, moreover, often be determined only by the frequency of its appearance? The individual words may in the mind of a certain author stand by themselves to denote separate conceptions; and the combination may have no special significance as a phrase. If, on the other hand, this group of words occurs frequently in the writings of an author, we may feel reasonably confident that the conception is single, the meaning depending on the phrasal force of the combination of words.

the dictionaries is sufficient, it is by no means safe to rest an argument for the influence of Old French on Middle English on the priority in date of the Old-French literature containing phrases identical with those in Middle English. The student must take into consideration the development of a language within itself—this necessity Mr. Sykes is not unmindful of—and the possibility of influence from more than one other kindred tongue. One language, at least, in view of its known intimate relations with Middle English, cannot be overlooked in an investigation of this sort. I refer to the Old Norse. Mr. Sykes is complacently neglectful of the very close connection between the Old-Norse language and Middle English. Under the discussion of *nimen*, *taken*, he says (p. 13):

The introduction of Old Norse *taka*, "take, seize, catch, grasp, reach," etc., which constantly won ground on *nimen* during the Middle English period, contributed much to the growth of phrases, but the evidence of the chronology and of the authors here cited shows that in the main we have to reckon with French influence and not Norse in the extension of the phrasal use of *take* during the period of which we treat. The definition of Old Norse phrasal influence is much to be desired.

I fail to see wherein the evidence of the chronology and of the authors cited shows the lack of Old-Norse influence. Mr. Sykes's statement, if it means anything, should be supported by direct proof. Of such he presents none. The truth of the matter seems to be that the author is not endeavoring "to show how, to what extent, and at what time the English language schooled itself to new phrasal expressions;" what he does is to endeavor to show how, to what extent, and at what time the English language schooled itself to *Old-French* verbal expressions.¹ Herein lies the danger, which the author does not avoid, of a mental prejudice in favor of his thesis—a prejudice which causes him to neglect certain obvious facts of literary history, and to disregard the evidence and the aid toward a sound judgment of language-influence and language-changes which he might obtain from a

¹ This method of approach in the study of the relations between Old French and Middle English is not unique with Mr. Sykes. Cf. what Professor Jespersen has to say in regard to the investigations of E. Einenkel.—*Progress in Language* (London, 1894), pp. 171, 172.

study of allied languages and literatures.¹ Obviously, then, the test of chronology which Mr. Sykes applies is not absolute.

It is not surprising that the result of Mr. Sykes's study of Middle-English verbal phrases under such limitations as are incident to his method of investigation, are not entirely convincing. A doubt arises in the mind of the critic as to the safeness with which Mr. Sykes may attribute so much phrasal influence to the Old French. As to how much of its present phrasal power the language would have acquired without any extraneous influence it is probably impossible to say. The history of other languages may doubtless furnish some evidence. But as to the *extent* of the Old-French influence on Middle English, the statement may be made with some degree of certainty that it was not nearly so widespread as the researches of Mr. Sykes would lead the reader to believe. The reasons for this statement will appear in the following section.

II

Certain literary monuments of the Middle-English period which were written in the north of England are generally assumed to lie beyond the pale of French influence. Among these, the most highly finished literary product which has come down to us is undoubtedly the *Ormulum*. Written about 1200 in the seclusion of a cloister by a monk who lived, according to ten Brink, in the northeastern part of the former kingdom of Mercia, the poem is practically free from Romance influence. Even if the opinion of Professor Kluge, that French influence had penetrated to the North by 1200 to a surprising degree,² be accepted, it is none the less true that this most important Middle-English monument is almost wholly without signs of intercourse with Romance literature or speech. I say "almost wholly," since Kluge gives a list of 23 words in Orm which he believes to be taken from the French; and furthermore declares that many surnames show French *Lautspuren*. Even with this evidence indicating some French influence, he would be most hardy, indeed, who should

¹ Professor Franz, *op. cit.*, calls attention to the evidence which Mr. Sykes might have secured from the history of the German language. Cf. also W. K., *op. cit.*

² "Das französische Element in Orm," *Englische Studien*, XXII, pp. 179-82.

suggest the possibility of any French *phrasal* influence on the *Ormulum*. A few foreign words may creep into an author's language when his knowledge of that foreign tongue is comparatively slight. But the presence in an author's speech of foreign idiomatic expressions such as verbal phrases demonstrates his entire familiarity with this outside language. As such an acquaintance with French in the case of Orm is out of the question, the possibility of any French phrasal influence in the *Ormulum* needs no further discussion.

If Orm was, as we have seen, little affected by the Old French, he was greatly influenced by the Old Norse. It is unnecessary to do more than state this universally admitted fact. What Kluge says about Old-Norse influence in general on Northern Middle English applies equally well to the *Ormulum*.

Noch in einem besonders bedeutsamen Zuge äussert sich der nordische Einfluss in England; es sind nicht bloss Stoffworte aus dem Skandinavischen entlehnt, sondern auch Formworte, besonders Pronominalworte. Derartiges begegnet wohl nur selten auf andern Sprachgebieten. Wir sehen daran wie intensiv die beiden Elemente sich gemischt haben müssen. Und zwar schon am Schluss der angelsächsischen Zeit.¹

Brate² gives 188 words in Orm taken direct from the Norse or showing strong Norse influence. Kingdon Oliphant³ says about Orm: "His book is the most thoroughly Danish poem ever written in England that has come down to us."

Now, if in the *Ormulum*, a poem free from French influence, these verbal phrases which Mr. Sykes ascribes to the Old French occur with considerable frequency, we are surely justified in denying the overwhelming French phrasal influence on Middle English. Furthermore, the justification of this denial is strengthened when we find that in Old-Norse literature anterior to or contemporary with Orm there exist in comparative abundance many of the identical phrases found in the *Ormulum* and in other Middle-English literature. And finally, though I do not urge it, the probability of considerable Old-Norse phrasal influence on

¹ *Paul's Grundriss*, I, p. 937, 2d edition.

² "Nordische Lehnwörter in Ormulum," *P. und B. B.*, X, pp. 1 ff.

³ *Old and Middle English*, 2d ed. (London, 1891), p. 180.

Orm¹ demands consideration, especially if we bear in mind the following facts: (1) the marked Old-Norse influence in general on Orm; (2) the Old-Norse literature in which these phrases occur is homiletic, sermonic; (3) much of the literature antedates the *Ormulum*.

Let us consider some of these verbal phrases, which Mr. Sykes attributes to the influence of Old French, with respect to their presence in Orm and the Old Norse respectively.

1. "Bear witness."

Orm:²

Ll. 12615-16 Annd I barr to þe leode

Wittness off himm

L. 18268 Whamm þu barr wittness to þe folle³

Ll. 18342-43 I barr himm wel wittness

L. 18929 He barr wittness

Cf. ll. 16888-89 Annd tohh swa þehh niss zuw nohht off

To takenn ne to trowwenn þatt wittness

Old Norse: *Leifar fornra kristinna froeda islenzkra*⁴, Arne Magneian No. 677, 4 to (c. 1180 A. D.):

P. 7, ll. 7-8 Verken bera vitni

P. 98, l. 12 þau ef vitni bera

P. 103, l. 27 oc boro iarteinir vitni heilagleic hans

P. 117, ll. 10-11 Sciotleicr iarteinar sialfr ber vitni

P. 138, l. 28 en þo bera guðspiallr orþ þat vitni

Norsk Homilie-Bog,⁵ A. M. 619 (c. 1170 A. D.):

P. 89, l. 32 oc bar vitni hinn sanna

P. 144, l. 18 Ðat vitni bar honum sialfr droten Jesus Christ

P. 186, l. 2 Honum bar droten vár þat vitni

Arne Magneian MS No. 645⁶ (c. 1200 A. D.):

P. 90, ll. 28-29 øll vitne þau er þeir boro

¹This looks like an *argumentum ad hominem*. It is to be observed, however, that I do not deny the probability of considerable Old-French phrasal influence on Middle English in general. So the possibility of some Old-Norse influence may be suggested without ascribing to the northern language a preponderating share in the process of verbal phrasal composition in Middle English.

²The *Ormulum*, edited by Robert Holt (Oxford, 1878); two volumes.

³This phrase Mr. Sykes quotes among the examples of phrases influenced by the Old French. He evidently does not recognize the difficulties involved in an acceptance of such an influence in the *Ormulum*.

⁴Edited by P. Bjarnarson (Copenhagen, 1878).

⁵Edited by Unger (1864).

⁶*Isländska Handskriften No. 645 i den Arnemagnæanska Samlingen*, edited by L. Larsson (Lund, 1885).

None of the other verbal phrases with "bear" are found in Orm. When we come to verbal phrases with "take," we find a great abundance.

1. "Take baptism."

The word "baptism" is not found in the *Ormulum* (an indication probably of the absence of French influence; its presence in other Middle-English literature is, I believe, merely as a *lehnwort*). Orm preserves the Anglo-Saxon *fulluhht*. Yet we find various phrases which have nearly the same meaning as "take baptism," and hence may be offered here as evidence.

Orm:

Ll. 19923-25 Annd forr soþ crist þatt þurh Drihhtin

To manne cumenn waere

Annd takenn wel wiþþ hiss fulluhht

Cf. also l. 17911 toc þa þær to fullhtnenn

Ll. 1973 ff. Annd all þatt folc þatt fullhtnedd wass

Att cristes Lerninngenihtes

þeẏ alle takenn Haliz Gast

Cf. further l. 11160 takenn crisstenndom

Ll. 17016, 17457 takeþþ crisstenndom

Old Norse: *Leifar*:

P. 92, l. 27 oc (toc) hann scirn oc var vel cristin alla ęfi

Homilie-Bog:

P. 84, l. 18 toc fyrstr scurðarskirn

P. 191, l. 8 þu toct við scirn

A. M. No. 645:

P. 46, l. 30 oc toc scirn manne domini

P. 109, l. 4 oc toco marger scirn

Cf. *Homilie-Bog*:

P. 64, ll. 16, 17 ver tocum við cristni

2. "Take flesh, humanity."

Orm:

Ll. 10436-37 Annd tiss daeþshildiẏ mann þatt crist

Toc i þe laffdiẏ Marẏe

L. 18505 Acc he toc flaesh

Old Norse: *Leifar*:

P. 58, l. 24 ef hann toc manliet øðli

P. 82, l. 22 þat er goddomr toc manzlicam

P. 180, l. 3 toc likam þrelz gaerr

P. 188, l. 3 ef þrels licam toc á sic.

Homilie-Bog :

- P. 68, ll. 27-28 þa er asnilegr guð toc synilégam manndom á sic.
- P. 69, ll. 31-32 at himna konongr tóe á sic iorð licams vars.
- P. 72, l. 21 oc tóe mannzlicam á sic.
- P. 80, l. 14 þa er hann toc manndom á sic.
- P. 119, l. 30 er galauslegr taer hold oc bloð cristi.
- P. 140, l. 24 ac toc manndóm á iorðu.
- P. 171, l. 18 þo at hann tóke manndom á sic.
- P. 119, l. 33 at hann toc hold.

3. "Take death."

Orm:

- Introd., l. 9 toc daep.
- Introd., l. 19 toc daep O rodetre.
- Introd., l. 84 toc O rode daep.
- L. 1423 toc daep.
- Cf. l. 15780 To þolenn daep o rodetre.
- L. 16268 O rode þolenn daep.

Old Norse: A. M. No. 645:

- P. 75, l. 17 toc licamligan dauða á sic.
- P. 128, l. 10 Dauða varn toc hann á sic.

Leifar :

- P. 74, l. 28 at sa leusti þa fra sunþom er sunfalauss toc dauþan.
- P. 74, l. 30 er licams dauþan toc á sic fur oss.
- P. 97, ll. 29-30 þa toc en dauþi ond.
- P. 169, l. 28 en prestrin toc braþan dauða. Cf. p. 88, l. 5 ef hann hafði *banasott tecna*.
- P. 93, l. 8 ef hann toc bana.
- P. 125, l. 15 Ef Eumorphius hafði tekitt banasott.
- P. 140, l. 6 ef hann toc banasott.
- P. 168, l. 24 þa er Cuthbert toc banasott.

Homilie-Bog :

- Cf. p. 145, l. 22 oc toco bana.

4. "Take example."

Orm preserves Anglo-Saxon *bisen* and likewise Anglo-Saxon *niman*.

Orm:

- L. 2114 Takeþþ bisne.
- L. 4834 takenn bisne.
- L. 14586 þu takesst bisne.
- L. 14470 Annd þiff þu bisne takenn willt.

L. 14696 Annd ȝiff þu takesst bisne.

Ll. 14826, 14920 takesst bisne.

L. 14822 nimesst bisne.

Numerous uses of *bisne* with the verb "to give" occur:

Cf. l. 1230 gifepp bisne.

L. 3747 gifenn bisne.

L. 15004 gifenn bisne.

Also ll. 2688, 2908-9, 2914-15, 3747, 4238-39, 4885, 6668, 7350, 8763-64, 9068, 12969, 14944, 15741, 19640.

Bisne is also used with *follȝhenn*:

Cf. l. 2150 to follȝhenn hire bisne.

Also ll. 5289, 5609, 6651, 7718, 8058, 8987-8, 9005-6, 10214, 10948-49.

In the light of the foregoing evidence from Orm, there is no necessity of or justification for one's ascribing the verbal phrase "take example" in Middle English to the influence of Old French. The single word "example" doubtless came from that source.

5. "Take heed, take keep, take *ȝeme*."

Mr. Sykes ascribes these three phrases to the influence of Old-French *prendre garde*, and, in the case of the last, also to *prendre cure*. It is to be noticed that the three words "heed," "keep," *ȝeme* are of Germanic origin, as is, of course, the verb "take." Of these words *ȝeme* is the only one in the *Ormulum* where it appears as *gom*. Its uses in Orm permit it to take any of the three meanings, so closely connected, of "heed," "keep," and *ȝeme*.

Orm:

Ll. 916-17 Forrpi þatt he ne namm nan gom

To fillenn all hiss wikenn.

Ll. 2910-11 þatt ȝuw birrp nimenn mikell gom

Hu mikell pine itt follȝhepp.

L. 4162 ȝiff þu þe sellf wel nimepp gom.

Ll. 5086, 6215.

L. 10950 ȝiff þatt he nimepp gom.

Ll. 13062, 14576 nimenn gom.

Ll. 14694-95 Annd ȝiff þu nimesst mikell gom

Till Abrahamess dede.

Ll. 14820, 14918.

- Ll. 15014-15 Annd ʒiff þu takesst mikell gom
 To follʒhenn Cristes bisne.
 Ll. 15856-57 þurh þatt he nimeþþ mikell gom
 Whatt gate ille an himm ledeþþ.
 Ll. 16136-37 þatt nohht niss off to nimenn gom
 off naness manness eʒʒe.
 L. 16930.
 Ll. 16988-89 Himm haʒfde takenn mikell gom
 off Cristess miccle tacness.
 L. 18839 nimenn gom.
 L. 19912 Ne namm nan gom off sinne.

6. "Take end."

Orm:

- L. 8108 þatt daʒʒ þatt he toc ende.
 L. 8252 Annd þære he toc hiss ende.
 Cf. l. 3243 he ʒaff hiss ende.
 L. 17752 he ʒife hiss ende.

7. "Take wife."

Orm:

- L. 3139 Annd toc wel wiþþ hiss macche.
 L. 7663 þatt daʒʒ þatt ʒho toc macche.

8. "Take rest."

Orm:

- L. 12991 Takenn reste.

Phrases found in the Old-Norse homiletic literature and not in Orm:

1. "Take cross."

Homilie-Bog:

- P. 141, l. 24 er æigi taecr cross sin.
 Cf. l. 27 bera cross drotens.

2. "Bear name."

Leifar:

- P. 64, l. 18 ef opt bera nōfn hina.
 Cf. p. 61, l. 18 þa taka þeir her nōfn.
 P. 165, l. 15 taca nōfn af hino.

3. "Take order."

Leifar:

- P. 67, l. 8 Ef tecr við boþorþom hans.

The foregoing observations on some phases of Mr. Sykes's dissertation, with the accompanying citation of verbal phrases from the Old Norse and the *Ormulum*, will serve, as the reader has no doubt already observed, at best merely to discredit much of the evidence offered by the author. The reason for my discussion of but one part of the essay is obvious.

The collection of verbal phrases with *beren*, *nimen*, *taken* from Orm is exhaustive. In itself it shows that the verbal phrasal power of Middle-English *taken* (Mr. Sykes dwells longest on this verb) is not pre-eminently Romance in character. The evidence from the Old Norse, I feel, is mainly contributory. These Old-Norse homilies and the *Ormulum* were composed about the same time. If the Old-Norse documents antedate the *Ormulum*,¹ the critic may be justified in ascribing to the Old Norse considerable verbal phrasal influence on Middle English of the verb *taka*, which had by itself gained so strong a foothold on English soil.

The chronology of the phrasal power of *taken*, as set forth by Mr. Sykes on page 22 of his dissertation, is partly in error. *Take baptism*, which he puts in the second half of the fourteenth century, is found virtually in Orm (the idea involved in the phrase and not the exact words being important). *Take flesh*, *take death*, and *take rest*, which Mr. Sykes puts in the first half of the fourteenth century, must likewise go back to the first quarter of the thirteenth century.

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¹ The reader will observe that the Old-Norse documents from which I quote bear earlier dates than the *Ormulum*. Other Old-Norse homiletic writings which show some of these phrases I have disregarded, either from uncertainty in regard to the date of composition or because they are probably of slightly later date.